Kirby's Reading List: *The Essentials*

By RDML John Kirby, USN

Here are 15 books that have made an enormous impact on me, personally and professionally. Indeed, I can honestly say that each of these has affected not only the way I do my job, but the way I *think* about the way I do my job.

These are books I have read and re-read several times…and often give as gifts.

It's not an all-inclusive list by any stretch. I love to read lots of different stuff. There are no works of fiction on it, for example, and there are no works of naval history—both of which I enjoy immensely. I chose, rather, specific books that have helped me make sense of the world around me and shaped the ways in which I try to communicate for the institution.

I claim no particular expertise in public relations. I've never received any formal education in the field. These books, then, have largely served as my reference library for a career built through "on-the-job" training. I hope you enjoy them as much as I have.

***On Writing Well*,** by William Zinsser
This is THE definitive book on how to write powerfully and clearly, everything from memoirs and travel pieces to science and technology articles.

Right in the opening pages—on page five in fact—he talks about the unspoken transaction between a writer and his readers: "Good writing has an aliveness that keeps the reader reading from paragraph to the next, and it's not a question of gimmicks to, personalize" the author. It's a question of using the English language in a way that will achieve the greatest clarity and strength."

If you want to write with clarity and strength—and we should ALL want to do that—this is the book you need to read. Then pick it up a few months later and read it again.

Brave Men, by Ernie Pyle
War is messy and ugly, cruel and destructive. But it is also a STORY, a story of drama and skill and pain and suffering. It is tragedy and comedy all rolled into one, the exclamation point at the end of the human sentence.

Nobody—and I mean NOBODY—tells that story better or more simply than Ernie Pyle did.

Brave Men, first published in 1943, is a collection of his syndicated columns from the time he landed with our troops at Sicily until the liberation of Paris.

He writes about World War II from the perspective of the troops, from the average Joe. There isn't a lot of strategy in this book, but there is an awful lot of heart.

Generating Buy In: Mastering the Language of Leadership, by Mark S. Walton
ADM Mullen made me read this book before we left Naples to come back to DC. We both found it enormously helpful as he prepared to be CNO. It's not a big book, but it's full of big ideas about how to communicate effectively. I still consult it frequently. It's a MUST read.

And don't let the title fool you. This is not some boring, new-age business book. It's about telling good stories and about being persuasive.

One of the chief lessons author Mark Walton—a former CNN producer—imparts is the power of THREE. People typically don't remember more than three things at a time. That goes for messages, too.

When you make a pitch, deliver a speech, or write a PA plan, keep it to three points and make them as personal as possible. Take the audience on a journey with you and you'll get "buy in."

***The Eloquent President*,** by Ronald White
We all know that Lincoln was a powerful speaker, but what many people don't realize is just how hard he had to work to develop that skill…and just how vital he considered it.

Examining a different speech, address, or public letter in each chapter, White explains the evolution of Lincoln's rhetoric from the lawyerly tones of the First Inaugural to the "immortal poetry" of the Gettysburg Address. He shows how hard Lincoln worked to be good at communicating.

This is one of the best books I've read in the last five years, and it only reinforced for me the enduring power of the spoken word—the speech—and the art form that is speechwriting.

For all our technology, we still can't do more or better than a well-delivered, well-crafted speech.

***The Savage Wars of Peace*,** by Max Boot
America has never really been an isolationist power. That's the premise of Max Boot's book. But just as critically, he says, we're pretty good at fighting "small wars."

We've had lots of practice, as Boot points out, basically staying "involved in other countries' internal affairs since at least 1805."

And, let me tell you, THIS is a Navy-Marine Corps story: the Barbary Wars, Panama, Samoa, the Philippines, the Boxer Rebellion, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Beirut, Grenada. The list goes on.

We were there.

You may take issue with Boot's conclusions about how and why such wars are fought, but his views deserve a hearing -- especially when we still have tens of thousands of troops fighting such wars in Afghanistan, Africa and elsewhere, even while we stay ready for the large ones which may yet loom.

***Let the Sea Make A Noise*,** by Walter McDougall
OK, this is a doorstop-sized book. Let me just get that out there right now. But it is well worth the time it will take you to read it. McDougall tells the twisted and sometimes sordid international history of the North Pacific since about the 16th century.

He does this masterfully and, as one reviewer says, "with a special emphasis on the intertwined histories of the Americans, Russians and Japanese."

But he also tells the story by dreaming up seminars hosted by ghosts: Father Junipero Serra, a Spanish missionary; Kaahumanu, consort of Hawaiian King Kamehameha; William Seward, Lincoln's secretary of state; Count Sergey Witte, prime minister to Russia's Nicholas II; and Saito Hirosi, Japanese ambassador to the United States. The ghosts argue with him and with each other, as they debate the relevant issues and try to derive lessons for us today.

Diving into this book will prove useful for any Navy leader as we begin to focus more of our attention and intellectual capital on the Asia-Pacific region. It's a beast, but it's a good refresher.

***Other Men's Flowers*,** by Field Marshal Lord Wavell
I have become a big believer in the power of poetry. Poetry is not written for the eye. It's written for the ear, for the heart. It has rhythm and meter and symmetry—the very things one needs to be a good communicator. It pulls you in even as it makes you smarter.

This is my favorite collection of poems, selected by Field Marshal Lord Wavell, a veteran of both World Wars and a scholarly man. Here is Kipling and Sir Walter Raleigh and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Here is Browning and Asquith and G. K. Chesterton.

Wavell collected these works for himself, to give him sustenance and comfort. "I have a great belief in the inspiration of poetry towards courage and vision," he said. "And we all want all the courage and wisdom at out command in days of crisis when our future prosperity and greatness hang in the balance."

***Journalism Next*,** by Mark Briggs
I'm an old guy, which means I have very little imagination anymore. What I like about this little book is that it forces me to think about "what's next" in the field of journalism. I know enough to know that if I can't understand that, I'm dead in this business.

I can't afford to stop learning.

Briggs does a great job laying it all out in simple, clear language—complete with lots of graphs and pictures so the history major in me can get it. You'll learn the future of micro-blogging, how to edit digital audio and how to make news "participatory."

It's a textbook of sorts for digital journalists, but PAOs and MCs can benefit a lot by reading it.

***Counselor*,** by Ted Sorensen
I didn't like everything about this book, to be honest. At times I thought Sorensen was being way too self-serving. But then I needed to remind myself that virtually ALL autobiographies are self-serving.

And it's a long read too, coming in at a whopping 896 pages.

But there is no denying that Sorensen was to John F. Kennedy what all good staff officers should be to their principals—a MOST effective advisor. He didn't just write JFK's speeches (which were fantastic no matter what you think of Kennedy's politics); he advised the President on nearly all matters of state—from the Cuban Missile Crisis to the decision to go to the moon.

Sorensen had plenty of chalk on his cleats. They were covered in it. We should strive for the same.

***Profiles In Courage*,** by John F. Kennedy
Speaking of President Kennedy, I have always enjoyed re-reading this Pultizer Prize winner of his. Artfully written, it tells the stories of eight U.S. Senators who defied constituent and/or party loyalties on conscience alone.

He writes, for instance, of John Quincy Adams" break with the Federalist Party…Sam Houston speaking out against the Kansas–Nebraska Act of 1854…and Nebraska Senator George Norris, who opposed the arming of U.S. merchant ships as a violation of our neutrality in the early days of World War I.

All of these men suffered politically—and sometimes personally—for taking these stands, but they took them anyway. They had moral courage. This isn't a book about being right. It's a book about doing the right thing. And it's a classic.

***Freedom at Midnight*,** by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre
It wasn't until I read this book that I felt like I truly understood the turmoil we continue to see in South and Central Asia. Ostensibly, this is a book about the partition of India, which took place at midnight on 15 August 1947. And it tells that story exceptionally well. The book reads like a novel. Indeed, the movie "Ghandhi" was based on it.

But it really takes the reader inside the psychology of the four men most responsible for dividing up the British Raj into modern-day India and Pakistan: Lord Mountbatten, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Muhammad Ali Jinnah. It also reveals the utter brutality of that partition.

It's a tragic story, but a critical one to understand if you want to understand why we still struggle with extremism in that part of the world.

***Stride Toward Freedom*,** by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
I am ashamed to admit that I didn't read this book until only a few years ago. It ought to be mandatory reading for every high-schooler. Not only was Dr. King a brilliant writer, he was also a good storyteller. And in this small but powerful work, he tells the story of the Montgomery Bus boycott—the beginning of the civil rights movement.

Why does it matter? Because that was a seminal moment in American history—the moment when we finally started to grapple with just who really were the "WE" in "We the people." It traces the journey of an entire community, dedicated not just to each other but to a better future for their children…and shows how a young man with passion and natural leadership ability helped transform a nation.

We cannot function as good advisors if we ourselves cannot understand other perspectives. And I don't believe you can begin to understand other perspectives until you feel them. Dr. King made me feel them.

The Life of Reilly**,** by Rick Reilly

I was never much of a sports fan as a kid. I played a lot of sports, but I didn't follow them much. The details of sports coverage just didn't interest me.

Then, in college, I took a part-time job as a sports clerk with the St. Petersburg Times. I got to know a bunch of sportswriters and came to appreciate how difficult their job really is. Sure, it's fun to cover sports, but making it interesting and fun for readers is a whole different matter.

That takes talent.

There is no more talented sportswriter than Rick Reilly. His column graced the back page of Sports Illustrated for nearly 23 years. Even my wife, no lover of sports, loved to read HIS stuff. She would often get to the magazine before I could and go straight to the back page. When he left Sports Illustrated in 2007, we canceled the subscription.

This book is a collection of his best columns up to about 2003. Some are funny, some are sad, some are poignant. But all of them make you think, and all of them are crisp. It's like he's talking to you.

You don't READ Rick Reilly, so much as HEAR him. That's good writing.

Following the Equator**,** by Mark Twain

Twain has always been my favorite author. I love his humor, his wit and the ease and simplicity of his writing. *Following the Equator* captures his essence best, in my view. It's a travel log of a trip he took around the world in 1897.

For Twain, the book was an attempt to make some badly needed money, but for his readers—then and now—it serves as a window into the world, a window we can still look through. He tackles racism and strip-mining and military adventurism. He lays bare the prejudices and the vices with which many foreign governments administered their colonies. And he does it all with the precision of a scalpel, making you think even as you laugh out loud.

Twain ends the work with this line: "Human pride is not worthwhile; there is always something lying in wait to take the wind out of it." A good lesson for us all.

Public Opinion**,** by Walter Lippman

Lippman was sort of the Tom Friedman of his day—a columnist, a thinker, a provocateur. He wrote about pretty much everything: politics, social issues, the economy. He published this book in 1922 as a fundamental treatise on the nature of human information and communication. It is still very relevant today.

Divided into eight parts, the work covers such varied issues as stereotypes, image making, and organized intelligence. Though dense in places— with examples that can be difficult for modern readers to follow—Lippman lays out the cultural and psychological factors that affect the way people think about events.

"The analyst of public opinion," he writes, "must begin by recognizing the triangular relationship between the scene of action, the human picture of that scene, and the human response to that picture working itself out upon the scene." You don't have to look any further than today's headlines to see how true this phenomenon remains. We would do well to remember that it isn't just "what happens" that affects public opinion. It's what people THINK and FEEL about what happens. It's about the imagery those events call to mind.